

“A Fresh Look at Christmas – Shepherds”

Luke 2:8-20

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Kory Wilcoxson

When Molly was born in June Leigh and I were anxious to send out the birth announcements. We wanted to send one to every person we knew, every person we knew of, and every person we might someday know. It's your new baby, you want to brag! But as happy as I'm sure the US Postal Service was for us, they simply don't operate on goodwill alone. So we had to decide to whom we were sending our birth announcements. Naturally, we sent them to the people we knew and loved the most. We didn't leave one for the garbage collector, didn't send one to our congressman; the announcements went to friends and family

Our scripture this morning is God's version of a birth announcement. Nowhere else in the birth narratives in Matthew or Luke does God proclaim to anyone that Jesus has been born. This is it. This is God's one announcement, and I have to say it's pretty spectacular. Leigh and I sent a picture of Molly in a cute little dress; God sent a heavenly light and a choir of angels.

Imagine for a second you don't know this story, and I told you God went to someone to announce the birth of Jesus. To whom do you think God would go? Caesar, the emperor of Rome? You would think so. What about the King Herod, who ruled over the region? Makes sense. Maybe God went to the High Priest in Jerusalem, the religious elite. Or maybe God went to the Mayor of Bethlehem: “Organize a parade, Mayor, I've got good news.” All of these people would be logical recipients of God's birth announcement, wouldn't they?

The palace doesn't hear. The Temple doesn't hear. Jerusalem doesn't hear. This birth announcement that God gives out goes to a group of sheep herders on the outskirts of Bethlehem – sheep herders! These shepherds are forever immortalized in our Christmas hymns and nativity scenes. We picture them with their crooked canes and flowing robes, almost as if they actually belong at the birthplace of a king. But they don't belong there. They don't belong anywhere.

Let me tell you a bit about shepherds. There were few occupations more demanding or degrading than a shepherd. They were the last people you'd expect God to take notice of. First of all, they were religious outcasts. According to Jewish religious law, these men were unclean. Because their work was a 7-day-a-week job, it prevented them from participating in the feasts and holy days that made up the Jewish religious calendar. Why? Well, somebody had to watch the sheep. When everyone else was making the trip to Jerusalem to make sacrifices at the temple, or to participate in one of the annual feasts, they were out in the fields, watching over the sheep. A modern day example might be a trucker or a shift worker, whose job keeps them from regularly attending church. It wasn't really their fault. But they were looked down on, from a religious point of view. They weren't regular attenders, so didn't belong.

Not only were they religious outcasts, but shepherds were borderline social outcasts as well. Since they were constantly on the move to find new pasture for their flocks, they were looked with suspicion as untrustworthy nomads, kind of the way people today might look at gypsies or carnival workers. They were often accused of being

thieves. If something came up missing – it must have been those shepherds. They were not permitted to give testimony in a legal proceeding, because their word wasn't considered trustworthy.

And on top of all that, they really didn't have much contact with other people. Most of the time, they were "living out in the fields" (v. 8). This was not a 40-hour a week job. They didn't come home every night. They were with the sheep 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. During the day, they led the sheep to grass and water. They watched while the sheep grazed. They kept an eye out for predators like wolves. And at night, they actually slept in the sheep pen with the sheep to guard against theft and animal attack. So you can imagine how they might smell after all that time with the sheep. Not exactly the kind of person you'd invite to Christmas dinner.

Do you see why the shepherds didn't belong at the manger? Being a shepherd was lonely, wearisome, usually very boring and tedious, and sometimes extremely dangerous. It gave them a lot of contact with sheep, but very little exposure to people. No wonder that David in the Old Testament, the shepherd who became king of Israel, was such an accomplished musician. Many shepherds learned to play the flute or some other instrument, because they had hours and hours with nothing to do but watch sheep eat grass. And you thought your job was boring!

Now, step back for a moment. Imagine you're God and you want to announce the most amazing, incredible, joyous news ever; an event which will literally change the course of history – the birth of your only Son, Jesus Christ. The birth of the One who will be the Savior of the whole world, the One for whom the nation of Israel has been waiting and hoping and praying for thousands of years. Finally, He has come! Who gets the announcement? Who do you tell? Who do you invite to come and see?

Not Caesar. Not Herod. Not the Pharisees. Shepherds. Smelly, dirty, social and religious outcasts, the shepherds. Can you imagine how the conductor of the angel choir must have felt when she realized her audience wasn't the royal family? It's as if the Mormon Tabernacle Choir rehearsed all year to perform Handel's Messiah and ended up giving the concert for eight guys on the landscaping crew.

Why go to them? Were they especially pious, unusually holy? Were they outstanding believers in God? Nothing shows us that. Had this visitation been a prophecy, were they expecting this? I doubt it. The shepherds were probably convinced God had no idea who they were. Didn't go to church, rarely said a prayer, hardly read the Bible. Does God even know who they are? Everyone in the local synagogue had told them they weren't welcome, they didn't belong, God didn't care about their pitiful existence. Is it any wonder, then, that when the angel of the Lord appears to them, they were absolutely terrified? How would they have heard the angel's announcement?

The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy." Not bad news? Not condemnation? Not any sarcastic remarks about only coming to synagogue for Hannukuh and Passover? "Today in the town of David (wow, David was a shepherd like us!) a Savior has been born to you (to us? God has given something to us?); he is the Christ, the Lord."

And the shepherds, who are normally obsessive in their protection of the flock, leave the sheep behind and race off to see the baby. And after they do, they spread the word concerning what had been told to them about this child. They became living birth announcements. And I love how people responded to this. The Bible says, "and all who

heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.” I bet they were! This is not the kind of information to which a shepherd is usually privy. The going rate for wool, maybe, but not good news of great joy about the Messiah.

You know, I think the shepherds were the perfect choice to announcement the birth. If God had gone to Caesar or Herod or anyone else in power, they would have tried to turn this miraculous event to their advantage. “Maps to the manger, only 10 denarii!” “Next on Bethlehem Tonight, an interview with the High Priest and his amazing story of an angelic choir!” People in power are always looking for ways to increase that power. The shepherds? They had absolutely nothing to gain, and certainly nothing to lose. They were empty vessels, waiting to be filled to overflowing with God’s joy. They were proof that God’s message is for everyone, from the highest to the lowest.

A visit by angels changed the lives of these shepherds. What difference will the coming of Christ made in our lives? Try to imagine a shepherd saying: “It’s been very nice that I’ve seen an angel, and it’s nice that I’ve seen the Messiah; it’s nice that I’ve believed in Him and that I’m going to heaven. But really, it’s not going to make any significant difference at all in my day-to-day life.” That’s inconceivable. They had a once-in-a-lifetime experience. And so have we who believe. Our belief in Christ, which is renewed this Christmas, is a transforming kind of belief.

After Christmas, we too will return to our “fields and flocks”—but let us go humbly as the shepherds, forever changed, transformed by the experience of Advent, praising and glorifying God, and letting people know about the good news of Christ through the way we live our lives. Let’s go back into the world as living birth announcements. We can return to “business as usual” at the same places, but not as the same people.

We’ve met the people. We’ve read the stories. We’ve heard the angel choir and we’re about to go the manger. Christ is about to be born again, in our world and in our hearts. So what’s next? “The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen.” What will you do? What will you do?

Fourth Sunday in Advent – Light the Candle of Love

First reader: We come to light the fourth candle of Advent, representing the gift of love. We have received no greater gift from Jesus Christ, the one who shows us the way to God. Jesus is the living example of God's perfect love for us, given to us so that we would not perish, but have eternal life.

(Light candle)

Second reader: As a newborn baby offers unconditional love to its parents, so the Christ child offers us all the unconditional love of God. Let us open our hearts to receive God's hope, peace, joy, and love this Christmas.